



- Home
- Platform
- Campaign
- Press Release
- Contribute
- Ex-Mayors
- Biography
- Coverage
- Press
- Toronto
- Twitter
- People
- Pictures
- Video
- Audio
- Cancer
- Fluoride
- Vaccines
- Health
- Wealth
- Relationships
- Articles**
- Thoughts
- Music
- Blog
- Links
- FAQ

Articles



Vijay Sarma - 2010 Toronto Mayor Candidate

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These are two articles I wrote a few years ago that a lot of people liked which definitely helped form my attitudes about the world and what I think we should remember, realize and do to help make it a better place. It's good to have the option now and then.

The first was published on a small website and then picked up, reprinted and referenced around the world. I received over 50 emails from fans around the world, I was on a Sirius Satellite radio show appearance, had an article about the article and more.

The second was published as an Op-Ed in The Toronto Star with a 4" x 8" picture of my head in black and white, the colour photo is below. It was also appreciated widely by young and old after appearing in 450,000 copies of the paper across Canada.

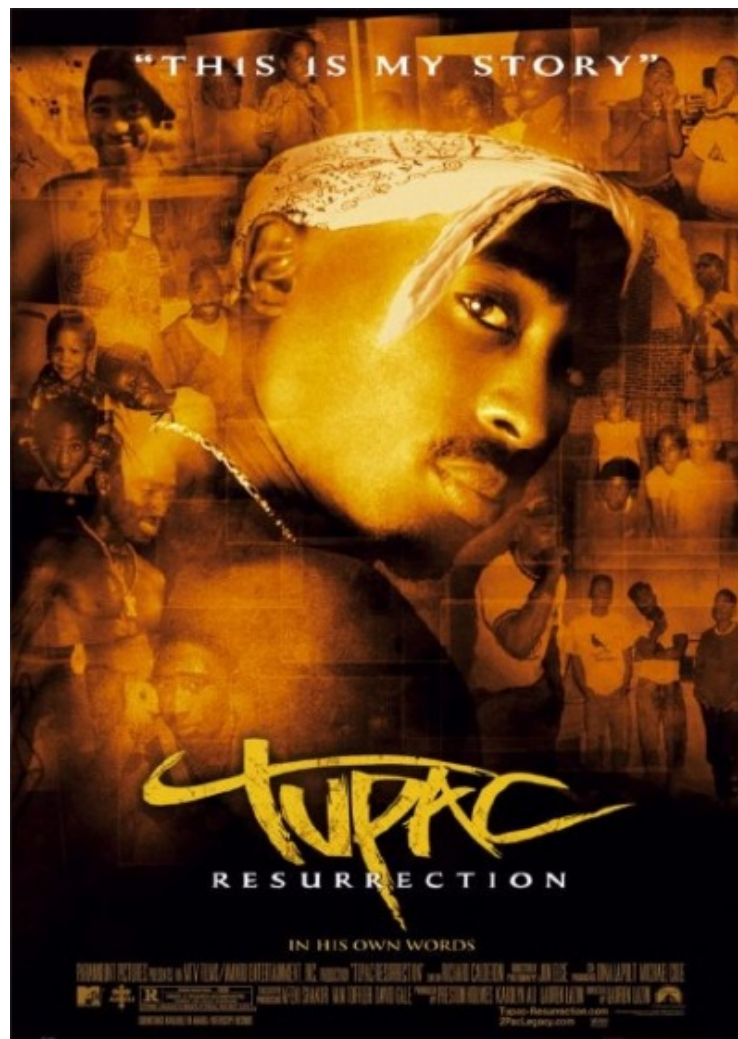
Right after that, I felt I had to start blogging. I realized I could say stuff well about race, socialization, relationships and more and get published, but I couldn't say any of the serious hard-hitting political stuff that I thought was necessary to really stop the violence.

My goals were to prove I could do things to prove that we could do things, or as a philosopher, come up with new and better ways to look at the same world that were universal, so if people heard them, they could use them and pass them on. That's still the case.

Both articles have since been taken offline, but they're reprinted in their entirety below. Please take a look and pass them on if you'd like. Over the last few years our culture has changed rapidly, so this is an idealistic snapshot of our recent past that might be useful.

Warm regards,

Vijay



Shumans.com

November 28, 2003

Tupacumentary: Living How You Want To Live

Here's a hidden fact: you want to be like Tupac. Not like Mike. Not like Shaq. Like Tupac. Another hidden fact: Tupac was not like Kobe, who has defenders willing to kill for him and the press giving him the benefit of the doubt. Tupac was extremely honest about his image minus spin-doctors, never cheated on his pregnant wife, and never had sex with the girl he went to jail for raping on the night he was accused of raping her, as the utter lack of evidence proved. Tupac when compared to any other "rock star" didn't do anything wrong, and in his own very unique way was everything any of us would want to be, we just don't understand it.

The image of Tupac was one you were taught to hate early, taught to fear, and yet these days hip-hop's influence has grown to where millions both black and white wear giant platinum crosses or other jewelry, flashy clothes, and joke like they're "playaz" and "gangstas", or by saying "whazzaaaaap" around the office. He was ahead of his time, influencing style and advocacy of socio-political equality and libertarian freedoms. He simply liked partying too, and we don't like our revolutionaries doing that, preferring Gandhi's fasting and vows of abstinence to essentially letting a "rock star" act like one. Most of us don't want to live a pious life, and if you were famous, you would like to express yourself freely without being judged a criminal for how you look, and thus never being truly free. A great actor, playing "America's nightmare" in movies like Juice and in videos had America scared without realizing what the original problem was, and he was the perfect object of hatred and paranoia who could potentially lead the neglected inner-cities to rise up against the suburbs. If you listen, you will learn that this is one of the smartest guys who ever lived, despite not usually wearing a Cosby-cardigan and glasses. Still, there were times he knew he had to, like on a Vibe Magazine cover for an important interview, just to make sure the mainstream took him seriously and read his defense against controversy. His messages were focused and brilliant, even though his diction was often not traceable back to the 19th century academic English standard we are afraid to deviate from to succeed in Western society. (I'm even afraid to do so in writing this, or you won't think I'm smart. Ya dig?) Besides, he wasn't talking to you, he simply invited you to listen. He was talking to his people, and advocating change and success in the ghetto, often a lost land in American culture discussed in terms of perpetual karma: ghettos are bad places with bad people, that's just the way it is. He reminded us we cannot be satisfied with civil rights progress in other areas, and that the ghetto situation is hellish and worth fighting for at least as much as Vietnam or Bosnia. "Brenda's Got A Baby" was a song about a 12-year old girl who got pregnant; "Dear Mama" was an ode to ghetto moms everywhere who raise their kids alone in poverty and crime and trying as hard as they could; and "Keep Ya Head Up" spoke to everyone in the ghetto, and if you listen, everyone in the world.

So, what's up with the "gangsta" stuff? Why would he soil his image like that and fail to sell much of the press and middle-America? Why didn't he tone it down so more people would listen? Two answers: he was representing what America had made in the ghetto, and saying hell with it, we're celebrating anyway (i.e. "Thug Life"); and he simply wanted to, as a vain handsome man who styled exactly the way he chose for various reasons, and whose fans loved him for it. In a free country, for the most part he lived a legally and morally sound life, only getting really angry towards the end of his five years in public life when his cries for change in the ghetto were largely ignored, his credibility was unfairly destroyed, and his justified fears about dying made him paranoid. He never attacked whites in anger like Ice Cube or Public Enemy did, and never sold drugs like 50 Cent did. He had balanced views of women the way Snoop Dogg never did, and he never had sex with minors like R. Kelly or Roman Polanski did. He had a reason to get famous and a responsibility to use it the way no rapper and few artists have ever had, including Eminem. He and Biggie Smalls are considered the greatest rappers ever, but B.I.G. (R.I.P. homie) never took nor was given the weight of the world, and never had the potential or inclination to change it the way Tupac had. This young man who lived a hellish youth and was looking to finally relax and enjoy life, initially had merely great ideas and a flair for inspiration, and those double-edged swords made him a leader of his people. At age 20 and given the same job as Malcolm X and Dr. King to save at-risk ghetto black youth, it's a wonder he didn't crack under the pressure. He could have chosen to make great party-music, instead he wondered: how can I represent my people? How can I be a gangsta and revolutionary intellectual? The film reveals some of his accomplishments, though he made it hard on himself by walking the line in his own way, consistently expressing himself with an often ironic honesty. So many people have missed the point, refuse to put his mistakes in context, and will continue to do so because of their ingrained prejudice against their image of him. Still, he deserves your respect: it's one thing to simply choose to fight for the revolution, it's entirely another when millions believe you may actually be able to win it.

To the majority, and white liberals per se, the simplest analogy would be Marilyn Manson: you can see how stupid it is that conservatives can't see past his appearance and realize that he's

simply an intelligent entertainer with another opinion and way of living (see: Bowling For Columbine). Eminem as well, who's had a chance to repair his public image as a crazy vile malcontent to now being considered a true artist. If any of this resonates, then you have to review your views of Tupac, as his views were even more mainstream (read: closer to yours) than Manson's or Eminem's. And if you're a conservative and against him on principle, better know thy enemy, because millions of people want to live in a world where racial and gender equality and opportunity are prevalent, and where no one's morality is dictated to them unless it's to prevent hurting someone else.

I had recently had a nice discussion with a young lady, in her mid-20's and white, who re-confirmed her "strong" opinion that Tupac was nothing but a gangster, and that any message he may have had was ruined because of it, and, by logical extension, his immoral behavior. I then asked her how much information she had on him to form a "strong" opinion, and she said very little. I then asked her why she had a "strong" opinion about something she knew almost nothing about, and she didn't know. This was not meant to be insulting, but rather enlightening, showing how we have predisposed views to look at an image and form "strong" opinions that stereotype black males, and will quickly default to those in the absence of any real evidence. This young lady was not a racist, but she was sure trained to be, and conceded a white rock star would be easier to forgive knowing almost nothing about them. My own views were similarly realized in seeing the film, as I found the negative press footage I'd been sold had clouded my judgment. This is similar to any prejudice: i.e. women dressed sexy are sluts, black men in nice cars are probably thugs who stole them, Goths dressed in black are freaks, etc. The logical extension of desiring everyone be and act the same was taken to its conclusions by Hitler, Pol Pot, and others, and it wasn't pretty.

You don't have to like Tupac or his music, but you have a responsibility not to hate him on principle or for racist reasons, recognizing and defeating your own prejudices to make a better world. Study the reviews of the movie, there are many that default to a negative view of the individual in lieu of discussing the content or style, and others that complain it's too sympathetic, as if he didn't deserve our sympathy after years of hatred. I dare you to find someone complaining about the same in a future documentary of say, Johnny Cash. Look at the bigger picture, because by making the struggle "theirs" as opposed to "ours", you are illustrating the exact problem Tupac gave his life trying to solve. So go and listen to his response in Tupac: Resurrection, and you'll see that despite what you think, at heart you and Tupac aren't that much different, and he wanted exactly what you wanted, to be free...

Vijay Sarma resides in the multicultural capital of the world, Toronto, and wanders the streets in a bathrobe with a lantern searching for truth as a freelance writer. He can be reached at vsarma@yahoo.com.

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Note: This is an article about the article above from Associated Content.

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Tupac Shakur: Going Above and Beyond "Thug Life"

Rory Geraghty | Associate Content | July 10, 2006

More Than What Meets the Eye

"Here's a hidden fact: you want to be like Tupac. Not like Mike. Not like Shaq. Like Tupac." Freelance writer Vijay Sarma begins his essay, entitled "Tupacumentary: Living How You Want To Live" with this statement. With a title like that, this essay seems like it could be a self-help guide.

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/42440/tupac_shakur_going_above_and_beyond.html?cat=9

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Note: This picture was originally in black and white and 4" x 8" in the Star.

The Toronto Star

Aug. 20, 2004. 01:00 AM

Kicking it in a kurtha

Some clothes make the man, but clearly the sports jersey doesn't cut it in Toronto's bar scene, says Vijay Sarma.

I was at the Bier Market, a trendy bar on The Esplanade in downtown Toronto an hour ago. It's Friday night.

Notice I wasn't "in" the Bier Market, I just showed up "at," and was told very politely that I couldn't enter wearing my brown bandana as part of my T-shirt, baggy shorts and sandals.

Now, coming from a Hip Hop Peace and Unity Fest, I expected to brave a yuppie cold shower to see friends there, and was fine with it. Plus, I'm familiar with Toronto dress codes.

Still, I ask the young lady what their full dress code policy is, and she obliges by reading a few items scribbled on a note-pad: no torn jeans, no tank tops, no bandanas, and no jerseys — except during Leaf games, when white and blue jerseys gain black-tie status. Baseball hats are fine, as are all manner of casual modest clothing such as T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers.

Except for jerseys.

I noticed the same policy in hip hop-hotbed Atlanta, where some bars welcomed the teeming masses wearing jerseys while others aggressively turned them away. This, despite the fact that most jerseys cover at least as much of the body as any other shirt and, unlike tank tops, conform to international decency standards (basketball jerseys are often worn with T-shirts underneath), even more so when oversized.

So, what's the problem?

Well, as most people know, in North America, black people wear jerseys. In fact, many others copy young black (urban) culture and wear jerseys. But at its core, it's a "black thing." So are bandanas and skull-wraps.

Thus the dress code policy may be rooted in racist and stereotypical thinking about blacks,

denying them free expression, and labelling them as more likely to cause trouble if not conforming to established so-called mainstream, traditional or white clothing options.

But I'm not black, and I'm not wearing a jersey, so what's my problem? Why can't I just take the bandana off? It's just a poser-thing, isn't it? What the heck's wrong with my hair?

Well, as a South Asian born in Toronto, I wondered if I could instead just roll up and kick it in a kurtha, the pajama-style outfit worn in India and by ex-pats here, or maybe just a long kurtha-shirt with a nice pair of jeans.

If I couldn't, while my peers were in ratty beer-label T-shirts, then that would suck. But even if I could, is that really fair? What are the roots of this dress code policy? What is the logic behind it?

I can trace my East Indian cultural history back 5,000 years, and can also make a convincing argument for my Canadian Charter rights to wear a kurtha anywhere in Canada. I've even worn fancy kurthas to non-Indian weddings for appreciative audiences.

African-Americans can trace their North American history back 400 years, but weren't given most of their rights in the U.S. until 1964, just 40 years ago, with many racist roadblocks to cultural evolution kept in place.

Some still exist.

This is what makes hip hop's global dominance all the more spectacular in just 25 years, utterly eviscerating racial superiority arguments, and proving to be well on its way into a permanent and continuing place in history.

The concepts of peace, love, unity, respect, family, language, style, art, humour, and social structure are all present in hip hop, like any other society, with many regional variations, and empirically it should then qualify for culture status.

Travel around the world and you'll be able to recognize hip hop style as distinct and identifiable in any country — jerseys, hats, skull caps, baggy jeans, etc.

For a fair and equitable society based on standards from all of Toronto's varied communities, we have to throw out the tired arguments based on stereotypes, such as hip hop clothing equalling gang-banger. Hundreds of millions of hip hop CDs are sold worldwide but that does not translate to hundreds of millions of gang-banger buyers.

In fact, hip hop culture is just the opposite of a destructive force. It originally provided a window into the world of disenfranchised blacks for themselves and, later, for everyone. Much maligned in its early days, hip hop struggled because it needed to convert each fan one by one.

It has evolved considerably, but even at its most excessive it is no more extreme or damaging than any other culture's most bizarre behaviour, and objectively less damaging than nearly every Western culture's foreign policy decisions — and most of their domestic ones.

Taken as a cultural entity, it is among the least destructive on the planet. As the late rapper Tupac Shakur noted about his own tales of the ghetto: "I didn't create thug-life, I diagnosed it."

Well, we should all be glad at least some people do. It's easier than admitting the selfish and systemic faults of our more established culture, the one that actually sets the rules for everyone else.

So, either we force African-Americans to skip over their history on this continent for any legitimate cultural claim, or we concede its already globally admitted value, forged stronger in the fires of persistent discrimination, and certifiable as clearly "hip hop" or "new black" culture in Canada and throughout the world.

Outside of subjective individual taste and values, commerce is a clear and objective judge of how people around the world truly feel about hip hop. And much of the world clearly likes it.

Therefore, as a matter of communal principle, this must include widespread acceptance of the humble sports jersey as casual evening-out leisurewear.

After some thought I decided not to go into the bar, simply because I knew in my heart that if I can kick it in a kurtha, then we should all be able to kick it in a jersey .

Vijay Sarma is a writer and hip hop activist living in Toronto.



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